

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

KRISTINA WONG & REBECCA SOLNIT: THE POWER OF ART & AUNTIES

LAURA FLANDERS: It's been a difficult couple of years, and I'm not just talking about COVID. People have faced racism, sexism, economic exploitation, and violence at disturbing levels. But a few months ago, I went to see my first live theater piece since the shutdown began. And it was at the New York Theatre Workshop, one of my favorite East Village locations. The show I saw there brought me back to life. "Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord," is a look back on the last two years with fury, but also humor. And it's kind of inspirational to boot. That's because in it, Wong tells the story of how she, a performance artist and comedian, founded what she perhaps hastily named the Auntie Sewing Squad, a network of primarily Asian American women who ended up sewing over 500,000 masks for medical workers and people in need all over this country. Today, I am joined by Kristina and another one of the Aunties who contributed to the project, historian, activist and author of over 20 books, Rebecca Solnit. They're two of the many contributors to a new book, "The Auntie Sewing Squad Guide to Mask Making, Radical Care and Racial Justice, which is out now from the University of California Press. Kristina and Rebecca, I am so excited to jump into this life-saving conversation, but first let's go to the moment in the show when you, Kristina, described becoming a sweatshop overlord.

KRISTINA WONG: It is nobody's dream to do anyone's laundry for living, but when the "Yellow Peril" came to America, white people did not like that immigrants were coming for their jobs. So laundry was the only work Chinese people could do at the time because it was considered women's work. And in me, their college-educated granddaughter, their dreams of Gold Mountain have come wildly alive. I am the default leader of these Aunties ensuring a machine-like output from our bodies, threaten to snip the fingers off any slackers, making the masks that the most powerful country in the world has failed to provide. This is my ancestral destiny. I am the Sweatshop Overlord!

LAURA FLANDERS: Take us back two years ago, where were you in 2020? And how did this performance piece, that is so much more than that, find its start?

KRISTINA WONG: At the top of 2020, I was set to tour a show called "Kristina Wong for Public Office." I had ran for public office in Koreatown, Los Angeles, because I wasn't sure what to do with myself as an artist anymore. We were living in times where artists and politicians had switched jobs. They were the ones creating shock and spectacle and it felt like artists were left in the position to kind of create community and social change. And it didn't make sense to make theater anymore that was like, look how ridiculous the world is because we were sort of clear that we were living in that. The show played twice. My last live show for an audience was on

March 12th, 2020 in Sacramento and the tour was cut short. I was deemed not essential, as most artists were. I sew my set pieces and props for my shows and saw that hospitals were looking for home-sewn masks and I went, oh my God, I have one essential skill. I have one essential skill and I can save nurses with it. And four days later on March 24th, 2020, I thought, okay, I'll start a Facebook group to try to find other people who are sewing and maybe they can pass their excess masks to me to fulfill these requests. And I called the group Auntie Sewing Squad in a rush, not realizing our acronym is A.S.S. And I thought we were gonna be a three-week project. We went on for 17 months. We grew to having over 800 Aunties across 33 states. We were doing relief van drives from LA to the Navajo Nation. We did eight of those. We did coat drives to Standing Rock. We also helped facilitate getting a lot of medical and hygiene supplies to Lakota folks. We redistributed hundreds of thousands of dollars of hygiene and medical supplies to farm workers and Indigenous communities.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's an extraordinary story. And I think it at least, last count that I saw was something like 500,000 masks you got out there and you were getting requests from all sorts of people who should have had their own supplies, but instead were relying on the Auntie Sewing Squad. Well, what about you, Rebecca? How did you come across the Auntie Sewing Squad? And how did you become a part of it, really?

REBECCA SOLNIT: One of the OG Aunties is my friend Valerie Soe who I've known since the 80s. She's an Asian American Studies professor at San Francisco State. She told me it was happening. And I thought I was just coming on as a journalist to witness what was happening 'cause I could tell that this was gonna be a remarkable mutual aid group. And you know I've written about disaster and the way communities respond positively in disaster, new communities cohere, this was something remarkable I wanted to witness. But of course you see needs and you get drawn in. I'm a very mediocre, slow seamstress. So I did not make any masks for the squad, but I helped fundraise and organize and got to know a lot of people. And it is truly the most remarkable mutual aid project I've ever seen in many, many ways.

KRISTINA WONG: So Rebecca's official title is our Historian Writer Shakedown Auntie. So because she would post something and it was like, boom, donations, boom, support, boom, fabric, like with all social. So she's being very modest, but she's the Historian Writer Shakedown Auntie, which I believe is your bio in certain spaces if-

REBECCA SOLNIT: I love that title. The Auntie Sewing Squad may be retired, but not over, and I'm keeping the title.

KRISTINA WONG: We are the cavalry if the cavalry wore mom jeans and sensible shoes, and always know the cheapest hours at the buffet. That's a lot of Asian women. Is

this a coincidence? No! Sewing was passed down to us from our mothers and grandmothers who learned it as a rite of passage to America.

LAURA FLANDERS: Why is it so often women that leap into the breach, Rebecca?

REBECCA SOLNIT: We could reframe that as like what the hell is up with men? Because we're always sort of creating all these things as about women that are often about men: violence against women could be retitled, violence by men, et cetera. But I think women, we're socialized as caregivers and we're socialized to be altruistic and to take care of other people. We're often socialized to believe that we're completely selfish if we're not doing it frantically all the time. But I think something we haven't touched upon that's pretty awesome is that Kristina named the group the Auntie Sewing Squad with its fun acronym, but the idea of Aunties is a kind of kinship, but not nuclear family with all the burdens and traps that entails. Aunties are these kinds of superheroes who intervene. There were uncles and male aunties and people who did not identify as either aunties or uncles in our group. It was quite diverse, but primarily female and primarily Asian American. Naming it the Auntie suggested kinship among the group, kinship to really all beings, all impacted people, and a kind of playfulness, as well as all the interesting roles aunties play in various Asian, African-American, Indigenous and you know, white southern cultures that I know of.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now you never did become a charity or a business. Talk about why, Kristina, and how did you choose the people that you were gonna help?

KRISTINA WONG: I didn't even know what mutual aid was until someone was like, "Would you do it as mutual aid?" And I was like, "I didn't go to that conference. What is that term?" And I looked it up and I was like, oh, it's sort of like doing the work of a charity, but without the board of director, the salary, the overhead, and all the red tape that's involved with that. And it was suggested to us a lot, like you could become a nonprofit. And I was like, I don't want to because I think we're basically meeting a need as it exists. And this sort of style of gathering and organizing has allowed us to be much more flexible with our resources.

LAURA FLANDERS: And in the show, you frame the Sewing Squad as, not just a mutual aid project, but as insurgents against racial injustice and economic injustice, and particularly looking at the pandemic's relationship to anti-Asian racism.

KRISTINA WONG: See, it doesn't matter if I'm third-generation Chinese American, this is a mask I cannot take off. It already says, maybe I'm an immigrant from the monolith that is Asia. Maybe I don't speak English. Maybe I'm the one who brought this virus here.

KRISTINA WONG: When I'm screaming to the internet, "Who knows how to sew? Who knows how to sew?" They were all Asian women who stepped up and that's because our mothers and our grandmothers did this as a survival skill when they got to America. And we had the Aunties whose experiences of growing up were helping their mothers cut piecework on the floor and helping cut rows of sleeves. And it was hard to not see the irony of that, everyone was mad at Asian Americans at the top of this pandemic, because of this perception that we somehow brought this virus or we're carrying it. And yet what I was witnessing is like, we're doing this unpaid labor and trying to protect everyone right now.

LAURA FLANDERS: This is so often the case, Rebecca, of the stories that you write about the very people who are not served by the system, know how to jump into that breach and get it done, the Aunties know how to get it done. How do you think about that now?

REBECCA SOLNIT: It was interesting to see the Aunties both as a sort of Asian-American-centered group, resisting the demonization and marginalization of people of color and Asian people in particular, and also to see women doing bottom line work, which so often happens, but doing it, not in a kind of nice submissive, sewing circle kind of way. There were a bunch of sewing groups, some of our members came from where you weren't supposed to talk about politics and Kristina as the leader, or as we call her our overlord, "Sweatshop Overlord," I believe is the title of her performance. So it felt quite radical to have groups that are sometimes silenced and marginalized, taking a lot of power to come together to redefine what was right and just and fair to connect to each other. And one of the things that was really striking is that it was building a lot of community for the Aunties, because obviously we were giving masks to people who needed them and we saw people just getting out of prison, refugees, farm workers, et cetera, getting masks, but also in the pandemic, people felt really isolated. They often lost their sense of purpose and community. And the Auntie Sewing Squad was providing that for each other. And I think I'm far from alone in saying that I have what are probably permanent friendships that have come out of what happened in those 17 months.

LAURA FLANDERS: Talk about making the piece that you've made, "Sweatshop Overlord," Kristina, which holds those two things so beautifully together in its hands for us in the audience, both the fury at the rise of anti-Asian violence against, especially Asian-American women in this period, the work that you're doing, and somehow also the joy and defiance in what you're doing.

KRISTINA WONG: It felt like the only, in a moment where we were feeling so helpless, point we can't even leave our house or buy groceries without wondering if we're gonna die, it felt like, well, by sewing, this is how we fight. This is how we do this war. And it also felt like in war movies, which I looked at a lot when I was trying to figure out how to write this show, it's not just about pow, pow, pow fighting, because that's what guns sound like, pow, pow, pow. But there's a camaraderie among the soldiers. This is complete disillusionment, so why we're

fighting. There's frustration at the system that is treating us like fodder. And these were also the emotions that we felt in this time, like does no one care that we're sewing? Is this even making a difference?

LAURA FLANDERS: And then in the middle of it, you have the police murder of George Floyd.

KRISTINA WONG: Dear George Floyd, you don't know me, our worlds are very different, but I watched you die on my Facebook timeline. I didn't realize when I first scrolled past that blurry, unfortunately familiar image of that white cop's knee on your neck that that was you being murdered, executed. I thought, oh, God, here is another upsetting image of a white cop being brutal to an unarmed Black person. And I chose to scroll past. That was privilege that I had in that moment to scroll past the image of your lynching on my timeline in hope that maybe this is a picture from the before times, maybe this is a Black person whose name we've already spoken and mourn, and continue to mourn. George Floyd, I want justice for you, and all those who've been murdered by state-sponsored violence.

KRISTINA WONG: Our super Auntie Jessica had called upon us to sew masks for the NAACPs in the hometowns of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, as a way of sewing with intention, offering protection that we couldn't be there at that parking lot and pull that cop off of George Floyd like the way we wanted to when we witnessed these video clips, but we could at least offer these tokens and this form of protection in these masks. And so we began to shift our attention to these communities that we felt like were getting disproportionately hit by the virus, getting disproportionately just hit in general by White supremacy and sending them support in that way.

LAURA FLANDERS: So how do you think about what endures? And, Rebecca, I know this is a question that you raise, for example, in the new introduction to your 2009 book, "A Paradise Built in Hell," you say, one of the questions you have about the stories that you tell of disasters and creative responses to crisis is why doesn't it last?

REBECCA SOLNIT: What you often see in disasters, and I was looking at earthquakes, explosions, hurricanes like Hurricane Katrina, et cetera, is that all normalcy kind of falls apart, institutional authority fails, and ordinary people self-organize to create the shelters, rescue the neighbors, build a soup kitchen, improvise the conditions of survival. And often people find a real joy and meaning in that work that connects them more deeply to each other, has more value than the work, making widgets for Widget.com that they may be doing. But often people, particularly in this country, seem to then just go, what we call going 'back to normal' without really questioning it. We saw that in 9/11 in New York City too. But not everybody goes back. A

lot of people are like, this is who I want to be. My values are changed. My sense of my own possibilities are changed. My realization that I can connect to community and how important it is, has changed. And they don't really go back.

KRISTINA WONG: This is making me think of our Auntie Ann, who was a wedding planner before this, and obviously that whole industry shut down and now she works at Peace Over Violence, working on their donations and fundraising, right? And she actually has shifted into doing mutual aid and supporting her unhoused neighbors in South Pasadena. It's relatively small compared to the unhoused population in Los Angeles, but she has like a very personal relationship with them. And our other Auntie Candice also does a food delivery to seniors in Chinatown, because they don't have a grocery store in LA Chinatown anymore, right? And a lot of this has been supported by other Aunties. Some Aunties have taken turns when Candice can't go, like driving the food over, or they've, they've supported Ann with stuff. And we're still doing things like, I guess, one thing that has struck a lot of us is some of us, like I joke that I was inherently selfish before this. I was a performance artist. There was no more self, like look at me, look at me, look at me, like that's a very selfish field that I'm in where I'm constantly like, no, no, no, you have to watch stop, stop, look at me. And so to shift into this very generous side, I've never felt so generous in my life. And to connect to all these people, like in LA, it's very weird to not be networking all the time. And instead I would just be meeting people outside my building because they had elastic and they were gonna bring it to me and were willing to risk their life to go outside to bring me a spool of elastic, some old quilt projects. And I just felt this respect and love in my heart for these people I'd never met before to the point, and I described this in the show, that they're driving away and I'm screaming, "I love you!" And who is this? Who am I right now? But there is this very intense love and this culture of love and care within our group.

KRISTINA WONG: Aunties, we have been warned about the second spike for months, holiday gatherings of six or more, super spreader rallies, no mask-wearing mandates in states like Montana, North Dakota, Florida, Georgia. Pfizer and Moderna shots are trickling in, but not fast enough to blanket all civilians. And that is where we come in. We will not concede. We will not give up.

LAURA FLANDERS: So the other question, Rebecca, which is one that Kristina poses throughout the show, is America a banana Republic disguised as a democracy?

REBECCA SOLNIT: You can certainly make a case for that. And we still have enough freedoms to do a lot of counter-organizing and people have, some of us more than others. And of course the Auntie Sewing Squad was about going against the tide of the Trump administration and ideology and impact in very obvious ways like supporting and promoting masks when masks were being more or less demonized. And we're a Republic with some democratic and some autocratic tendencies. And I think right now we're in a kind of Götterdämmerung kind of final

battle between democracy and authoritarianism and voting rights for everything, human rights, reproductive rights, climate justice, et cetera, are all tied together. We're gonna decide in the next few years which direction we go. And the pandemic just brought a lot of that to the fore.

LAURA FLANDERS: If we were gonna learn from the Aunties, you have a wonderful website, Kristina, and you have your values and principles laid out there. There's quite a few. I'm not gonna ask you to rattle them all off, but if we were gonna learn from the Auntie Squad as we head into 2022, Auntie Sewing Squad, what would be the key learnings?

KRISTINA WONG: I think that this was a moment to learn that I think I was shocked at myself, 'cause I always imagined in the rapture that I'd be the one like fighting everyone with a pipe and running off with my belongings and moving into scarcity mode. But I think there's something that we all have to give and offer to each other. And this is not to say, like give away all your belongings and then you're destitute. But I think that to take a pause and say, what do I have to offer? And where can I be of support in the situation? And to act on that versus fear and me, me, me, me, I mean, it's for me. And I think that generosity really will open a whole new way of understanding how to act in crisis and understanding what power you actually have in the situation and is actually very useful to others.

LAURA FLANDERS: And it might make you kinda happy along the way.

KRISTINA WONG: Yeah.

LAURA FLANDERS: If people missed your show at the New York Theatre Workshop or the streaming that happened afterwards, are they still able to catch it? Will they be able to catch it this year?

KRISTINA WONG: I hope so. We're working on a tour, but no dates are confirmed as of this interview. So I recommend that you pick up our book, "The Auntie Sewing Squad Guide to Mask Making, Radical Care and Social Justice." I feel like that's a wonderful account. Rebecca's holding it, a wonderful account of what our work has been and a way to sort of experience it in lieu of seeing the live show, but please keep your eye open and hopefully it will come to a theater near you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let's hope so. Rebecca, what are you working on?

REBECCA SOLNIT: Oh, just the usual, writing essays about reproductive rights, climate and everything else under the sun, a 300 year old violin, and which ties to climate and the way I'm writing about it, the usual.

LAURA FLANDERS: I can't wait to see more from you, Rebecca, and absolutely, Kristina. The next time you're in town, I am gonna come and see whatever it is that you do. And I will try to practice the principles of the Sewing Squad. Thank you so much.

The great thing about calling your squad Aunties is that auntie is an identity. It's very hard not to like. As Rebecca Solnit says today, Auntie comes with a sense of the familial without the nuclear, with a sense of belonging without the baggage, if you like. As we look back over the last 12 months, many people today are talking about that sense of belonging that seems to be missing in so many places in a society that many seems to be coming apart. As we look at what happened January 6th in the Capitol, you have rioters who say they were just wanting to be part of something, that they were taken up with a herd instinct. And you have prosecutors who say, well, that herd instinct left 150 police officers injured, and five people dead. Sure enough, you can't have a riot without rioters, and you can't have a society without people who feel that they're a part of it. But something else happened a year ago too that we would be foolish to forget, which is that more Americans than ever signed up to participate in their democracy and people in all sorts of historically very segregated places from Native American reservations to Southern states like Georgia came together to cast votes that tipped the balance in Congress. So while we look at both sides of the story, on this program, we like to remember that where we focus, grows. And I'd like to thank Kristina Wong and Rebecca Solnit for reminding me to focus on belonging of a more sewing squad sort, a mutual aid organization that wasn't in fact a sweatshop was indeed a society that looked after its participants of every sort and gave me an experience of belonging, again, live in a theater. Thank you for that. And thanks all of you for joining me. I'm Laura Flanders for The Laura Flanders Show. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining us.

For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content and tune into our podcast, visit our website at LauraFlanders.org and follow us on social media at [TheLFshow](https://www.instagram.com/TheLFshow).